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The Journal's insidious portrayal of Hackney

By DAN ROTTENBERG

Hackney's performance on the Penn campus bore no resemblance to that described in the Wall Street Journal editorials.

When University of Pennsylvania President Sheldon Hackney recently (a) expressed compassion for frustrated black students who trashed one day's press run of the Daily Pennsylvanian, (b) declined to suspend Penn's "hate speech" code when it was enforced against a white student who called noisy black women students "water buffaloes," and (c) was nominated by President Clinton to head the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Wall Street Journal thought it had discovered an editorial writer's dream: a symbol of all that's wrong with politically correct American colleges and its politically correct government, wrapped up in a single mealy-mouthed academic.

In vain did Hackney's friends and supporters object that the Journal's editorial portrayal of him was a mere caricature of the real Penn president. "The much more insidious problem with the Sheldon Hackneys of American university life, and their number is legion," the Journal explained, "is that instead of courage, we must listen to their casuistry about 'tolerance'; instead of leadership, we must bear their silent complicity in the suppression of honest opinion."

That's heavy stuff, all right: a nation of college campuses run by Hackney clones — every last one of them an appeaser of public opinion and a censor of honest speech. But the Journal's editorials reminded me of a time, some 23 years ago, when I was myself a Wall Street Journal reporter covering the famous incitement-to-riot trial of the "Chicago Seven" peace protesters.

Barely a week passed during that long trial that the Journal editorial writers in New York didn't publish some denunciation of the defendants' allegedly outrageous courtroom behavior. But the behavior I observed and reported in that Chicago courtroom, like Hackney's behavior, bore no resemblance to that described in the Journal's editorials.

A few months later, our Chicago bureau was visited by a Journal editorial writer whose mission was to encourage us reporters to write more essays for the editorial page (a constant problem: Most Journal reporters despise their own paper's editorial page with the contempt journalists inevitably hold for ideologues). In the course of the meeting, I brought up the Journal's schizophrenic coverage of the Chicago Seven trial: If the Journal's editorials were going to contradict the Journal's own reporters, I suggested, would it be too much to ask that an editorial writer attend the trial and see for himself?

"Well," the editorial writer replied, "I don't think anything I would have seen at that trial would have changed the way I feel about those people."

The fellow who said that was named Robert L. Bartley. Two years later he became editor of the Journal's editorial page. He's been the voice of the Journal ever since.

Aside from this story's obvious lesson, which you'll also find in Gilbert and Sullivan — "Stick close to your desks and never go to sea, and you all may be rulers of the Queen's navee" — what real-life lessons can we draw from this year's adventures of Hackney, his conservative critics, and campus experiments in "hate speech" codes? A few suggestions:

■ Anyone who believes in free speech understands instinctively that prohibiting "hate speech" is a bad idea. But sometimes we need a demonstration to remind us precisely why it's such a bad idea. Penn's "water buffalo incident" this year provided that demonstration just as, say, for decades the Soviet Union vividly demonstrated why command societies don't work.

Specifically, "hate speech" codes fail because their overkill generates more sympathy for the transgressor than for his victims, just as, say, capital punishment often generates greater public sympathy for the condemned murderer than for his victim.

■ Good manners can't be legislated. With the prospect of some heavy-handed punishment hanging over his head, Penn student Eden Jacobowitz became not an object of contempt for his obnoxious behavior but an object of sympathy for his impending martyrdom. Penn's "hate speech" code focused so much attention on the question of whether "water buffalo" is or isn't a racial slur that everyone lost sight of the larger truth: Polite, well-adjusted people, no matter how aggrieved, do not go around calling other people "water buffalo."

(Think about it. When you're awakened by street noises outside your window, is your first instinct to scream and curse? Or do you say, "Excuse me, folks, I'm trying to sleep — would you mind quieting down?")

■ The other flaw in the concept of "hate-speech" codes is the notion that offensive speech violates the human rights of the speaker's audience. On the contrary, free speech enables the audience to understand the nature of the speaker. (If I write an idiotic column, I'm not violating your rights; I'm announcing to you that I'm an idiot.)

■ The Journal assumed that a university president rules his campus with an iron hand — a notion that must bring a hearty guffaw to anyone familiar with campus life these days. Wallis Warfield Simpson assumed Edward VIII was master of all he surveyed, when in fact he was really a captive. Ditto for "the Sheldon Hackneys of American university life."

■ This year's generation of "hate-speech" codes represented a seminal attempt to discover how young, opinionated people of diverse backgrounds can coexist peacefully. Speech codes are a bad idea but the experiment was a good one nevertheless, because it yielded valuable lessons.

Attacking this first attempt at campus tolerance for its imperfections is like attacking Henry Ford's first Model T because it lacked power brakes or attacking the Founding Fathers because their first model of democracy excluded blacks, women and the unpropertied. Hackney can be faulted for much in his 13-year tenure at Penn. But the fact that "peaceful diversity" was first explored on his watch may prove his finest and most enduring legacy.

Dan Rottenberg is a regular contributor to the Commentary Page.

And he'd better take care jogging

By MARIANNE RONCOLI

Running in Washington, D.C. has some hazards that you will find no where else.

Although jogging is very good for your health, running in Washington, D.C., can be hazardous. Most people running in Washington these days are young. The performance of the White House staff, however, suggests that youth does not guarantee fitness.

When Penn President Sheldon Hackney arrives in Washington to run the National Endowment for the Humanities, he might want to follow these guidelines as he dons his jogging suit to ensure his health and well-being in our nation's capital.

■ Stretch before running. Push up against a sturdy wall, like the Capitol for example. People have been pushing up against it, trying to move it for years. Don't worry; it won't budge. When stretching, pay special attention to your Achilles' heel.

■ Go to the track by the Washington Monument. You will notice a lot of people running around in circles. These are Republicans and conservative Democrats. Don't follow them; set your own pace.

■ Don't run in place especially near congressional office buildings. You might be mistaken for a lobbyist.

■ Run in broad daylight. If you must run at night, carry Mace. Ross Perot could sneak up behind you at any time.

■ Run with a friend who knows the routes. Observe all traffic signals. Don't change direction; it drives the man on the street crazy.

■ Eat a balanced diet. Avoid deficits. They are hard to manage in Washington.

■ Tax your energy carefully. The Senate will exhaust you if you don't.

■ If you injure yourself, while running and need medical assistance, call Hillary. She will refer you to the best insurance company.

■ Test the limits of your endurance. If you don't, Bob Dole will.

■ Consider the weather before you run. Avoid the White House Press Room when a storm is brewing.

■ Dress appropriately. Do not wear Ivy League business school T-shirts before monthly reports of leading economic indicators are released. You will sweat too much. Don't wear Ivy League medical school T-shirts before the health-care reform package is announced. Itching and irritation are likely to occur.

■ Remember, no pain, no gain.

Marianne Roncoli is on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing.